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Two good choices

Were it not for the scandal over photographs taken at the Hamilton County morgue, there probably wouldn't be much of a race for Hamilton County coroner this year.

After all, Dr. Carl Parrott, the incumbent, is widely regarded as one of the region's pre-eminent forensic pathologists. Educated at Yale and Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, he came to Cincinnati in 1981 to work with the legendary Dr. Frank Cleveland, who at the time was the Hamilton County coroner.

Parrot served as a deputy coroner and chief pathologist before taking over as coroner in 1995 when Cleveland retired. Today the office -- formally known today as the Frank P. Cleveland M.D. Institute of Forensic Medicine, Toxicology and Criminalistics -- functions both as a morgue and as a state-of-the-art crime laboratory that generates revenue by running tests for a variety of jurisdictions.

Over the past decade the work by Parrott and his staff has helped police unravel the cause and culprits in hundreds of violent and mysterious deaths. That's part of the reason Parrott won the endorsement of Hamilton County Sheriff Simon Leis Jr., and why the director of Greater Cincinnati's largest hospital trauma unit has publicly expressed his support for having a professional forensic pathologist in the coroner's office.

But Parrott has also demonstrated his independence from police. When Roger Owensby died in police custody, Parrot conducted a dispassionate examination, brought in other specialists, then promptly and declared publicly that Owensby's death was the result of mechanical asphyxiation. His actions then didn't win him any popularity contests with the police department (the Cincinnati FOP, complaining that Parrott made premature and inflammatory statements in the Owensby case and another involving a police use of force, endorsed his opponent), but he made a gutsy call on the basis of the facts before him.

What about the morgue photo scandal? In 1999 Parrott and his staff met with a photographer, Thomas Condon, to discuss his possible help in making a training video. Workers at a local photo lab in 2001 alerted police about film that Condon had brought in; a subsequent investigation showed that he taken photographs of corpses at the morgue with representational objects -- including sheet music, miniature furniture, an apple and a key -- as part of a work he called the "Cycle of Life." Condon was subsequently convicted of abusing a corpse. Jonathan Tobias, then a deputy coroner, was accused of giving Condon access to the bodies and was convicted on similar charges, but they were overturned on appeal.

Some of the attorneys suing on behalf of families whose loved ones were photographed have alleged that Parrott knew beforehand the pictures were being taken. But Parrott denies the allegation; Condon told police Parrott wasn't aware of his activities, and we've seen no credible evidence that he knew what Condon was doing.

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What is apparent is that when Parrott found out about the photographs he acted appropriately. He notified the families, suspended Tobias and installed a security system that records everyone who enters or leaves the morgue and monitors their activities in key areas inside it.

The public outcry over the morgue photograph scandal is part of the reason Parrott has such a strong challenger this year: Dr. O'dell Owens, a prominent physician and business executive who formerly served as chairman of the University of Cincinnati board of trustees.

Owens is an inspiring personality. A graduate of Woodward High School, he graduated from Antioch College in 1971, earned his medical degree and a Master's degree in public health from Yale University and studied at Harvard before returning to Cincinnati in 1982 to open the region's first center for reproductive endocrinology at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center. No longer active in that field, Owens has served as senior medical director of United Healthcare of Ohio and, since 2001, as an independent healthcare consultant. He serves on the governing boards of U.S. Bank, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport and the Cincinnati Fine Arts Fund. He is also active in non-profit programs involving students in urban schools.

The irony of his medical training in reproductive health, in light of the job he's seeking, isn't lost on Owens. He readily acknowledges that his expertise is with the beginning of life, not the end, but argues that his training as a physician and his extensive management experience amply qualifies him to serve as coroner. Moreover, he notes, most of the day-to-day work is done by specialists; the coroner's real duty, he says, is to hire good people and manage the operation efficiently.

Owens says he wants to use the office as a pulpit to educate children about the dangers of drugs, guns and the like; to develop greater sensitivity within the coroner's office to world religions traditions; and to strengthen the office's public health roles.

Voters are well-served in this race; they have two good choices. We give the nod to Parrott, on the basis of his superior experience in this position. But we're not losing sleep over this one. Whoever wins this election, we believe, will serve the people of Hamilton County well.

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